

# Islam, race and the question of British identity

It was a simple idea with a big ambition - put 50 people together for 24 hours and give them two questions: What are the consequences of an increasingly assertive Muslim political identity in Britain? And, if multiculturalism has been discredited, as the chairman of the UK's Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, claimed last year, what do you put in its place? What resulted was an intense, sometimes fractious and, thankfully, occasionally humorous debate which sprawled from abstract argument about identity to concrete issues of how unemployment among Birmingham's (UK) Muslims is three times the city average, and how, in some British cities, school playground fences separate ethnic groups so sharply it suggests comparison with apartheid.

We didn't end up with a shopping list or clear-cut answers, but perhaps the event could help to kickstart a much-needed debate: It brought right

out into the open the issue of how does secular Britain deal with the reassertion of religion in political life. This conundrum has split progressives in a way that race issues have not done for several decades; all its inclinations are to insist that religion is strictly a private matter, but that is being profoundly challenged by a British Muslim community which uses many of the arguments and terms of identity politics (such as race and feminism) with which the centre left has had such a close association for the last 30 years.

These issues are being negotiated (and manipulated) across the political spectrum. But we didn't attempt to reflect the full range of British opinion - this was largely a conversation among allies, indeed within the alliance which has been responsible for whatever accommodation Britain has managed to achieve with diversity.

If multiculturalism was the left's response to mass immigration in the 60s, patchily

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applied, frequently misunderstood but, for all that, relatively successful, what will be the left's response to faith identities as British Asians increasingly choose to define themselves by their religion, not their ethnicity? Multiculturalism has, to some extent, succeeded in dismantling the definition of British as white. Now another chapter has to be written in which British identity is no longer synonymous with a Christian secular accommodation.

"I believe in God," one participant prefaced her remarks, and you could hear in the quality of silence in the room the shock that religious belief is unapologetically trespassing into mainstream debate for the first time in over a generation.

Some fears that reared their heads in the discussion seem bizarre, but some are well founded: Fundamentalism has emerged as an aberrant, aggressive phenomenon in all the world's religions.

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But, above all, faith identity provokes confusion. Why should one faith identity - Muslims - be recognized by the state and not another - such as Hindus or, for that matter, Scientologists? Does every faith get a few peers and state schools? Recognize faith identity and does one end up arbitrating between extremist interpretations of those faiths - the evangelical Christian and the Sikh mobs between them constraining free speech? If one has both a religious and a political identity, do they reinforce or undermine each other?

The answer depends, of course, on how those two identities are defined - an Islamist reading of what it is to be a Muslim is not going to bed down easily with British democracy, nor will British identity as Christian secular be accessible to Muslims. This is where the "work in progress" road sign gets erected; the two identities are being reconfigured on the streets of Tower

Hamlets, east London, and Birmingham, in the pages of newspapers and on TV screens in a chaotic construction process. One could follow the metaphor to its bitter end and point out that in this construction project, the Muslim identity is a global joint venture affected by the Ummah from Iraq to Kashmir. The questions about identity sound abstract, but they boil down into the detail of individual lives - where and to whom do you belong? Who do you know as friends and neighbors? Who do you marry?

We all live segregated lives to differing degrees - the English middle classes call it PLUs, "people like us", and government is not lecturing them on social cohesion. Even in London - the most diverse city ever - studies show there is significant social and economic segregation. So when - and who decides - are some levels of segregation detrimental to the common good, such as the increasing white flight from British cities, or intro-

verted faith communities? Compound segregation with chronic poverty, and it seems self-evidently dangerous, as the 2001 riots proved.

For the left with its traditional preoccupation with solidarity and justice, the questions of how to build bridges between communities, and of how and when the state should intervene, in school admissions, in housing allocations - are the most compelling. The proverbial "elephant in the room" made many appearances over the two days. Accusations of racism and danger ahead; these are debates that are usually so contentious that many on the left nervously retreat behind platitudes, giving dangerous quarter to the far right to distort perceptions and fuel hatred. Or merely leave the task of framing public debate to those with less good will. We can't afford to let them do so - the challenge is to develop habits of solidarity, personal and political, with those who are different from ourselves.